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Between love and rejection: Hybrid identities and transcultural documentary film-making: Films by Sara Ishaq¹

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Abstract

This article focuses on the transcultural, Oscar-nominated Scottish Yemeni, documentary filmmaker Sara Ishaq, especially her films *The Mulberry House* and *Karama has no Walls*. I place Ishaq's film in the context of a subgenre of non-fiction films, the increasingly important human rights documentaries, and I also align her work with the concept of 'accented cinema' and ways in which the hybrid identities of transcultural film-makers – operating in what Homi Bhabha describes as the 'third space' – translates into their films. The main argument is that the 'politics of justice' has inspired many minority and women's groups in the world but that the simple epistemology of the human rights films is complicated by the hybrid identities of transcultural film-makers and the complexities of the domestic sphere where affect and politics are being played out.

Keywords

Transcultural documentary filmmaking, Human Rights films, 'Third Space' and hybrid identities, Yemen, Sara Ishaq.

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Between Love and Rejection

How often do we join the daily life of a Yemeni family? The routines, the shared meals, fathers in pyjamas playing with their kids, rebellious daughters and their embarrassed grandfathers all set against a rapidly changing social and political environment. Streets full of protesting citizens shouting – and violently being knocked down – while at home the family shouts at the TV screens, crying in shock and horror at the unfolding events. All these intimate and emotional reactions were recorded by a daughter who left her home country of Yemen when she was 17 years old, became a film-maker and then returned home to make a film about her grandfather. It all turned out rather differently than she had expected.

This article focuses on the transcultural, Oscar-nominated Scottish Yemeni, documentary film-maker Sara Ishaq, and in particular her film *The Mulberry House* (2013). I place Ishaq's film in the context of a subgenre of non-fiction films – the increasingly important human rights documentary – and I also align her work with the concept of 'accented cinema' (Naficy 2001) and how the hybrid identities of transcultural film-makers operating what Homi Bhabha (1994) describes as the 'third space' translates into their films.

Before 2011 Yemen did not feature at all in western media. Yemen was an unknown ex-British colony, conservative Islamic, arid, poor and the least developed country in the Middle East, if not in the world. Literacy has increased – 85 per cent men (but only 55 per cent of women) are literate (CIA 2015) – and one third of the population is unemployed (Hillauer 2005). It is rarely mentioned but Yemen is actually the only multi-party Republic in the Middle East, and for years different political parties and tribal groups were to a certain extent incorporated in the government by President Ali Abdallah Saleh. Yemen entered the UK media in 2011 on a positive note when Yemeni women's rights activist Tawakul Karman, founder and chair of

Between Love and Rejection

Women Journalists Without Chains (WJWC), was one of three recipients of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize. Yet apart from the successful comedy *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* (Hallström, 2011) public knowledge of Yemen is limited and, other than as a tourist destination, the country rarely appears in western media.

Images of Yemen entered the mainstream media during the ‘Arab Spring’ (2011) when protest was shown for the world to see, especially the Friday of Dignity on 18 March 2011, when Yemeni security forces violently crushed peaceful protest against the president, who was ousted after 33 years of running the country. Sara Ishaq, assisted by three other cameramen, was filming the Friday of Dignity, resulting in the documentary *Karama has no Walls* (2012), which was nominated for an Oscar in 2014.

In 2015 media coverage changed. Where previously there had been images of protest, of demonstrations leading to apparent success in the creation of a federal state structure, now there were images of chaos following the outbreak of civil war and, the Saudi-led aerial bombing of Houthi areas and strongholds in the capital, Sana’a. The Houthis are a Shia tribe, allegedly supported by Iran, in an otherwise predominantly Sunni Yemen. From that moment in time, for western audiences, Yemen became another country in turmoil like many other postcolonial countries in the Middle East. A power struggle unravelled between the groups loyal to the elected president, different tribal groups and Al-Qaida-related groups in the south, as well as foreign powers like Iran, with the Saudis also playing an important military role in the complicated political play for power and influence, while at the same time a humanitarian crisis was unfolding. Now on show in the media were bombed buildings, injured people and overstretched hospitals. Water tanks were brought in to deal with the shortage of water and international aid organizations pleaded for humanitarian pauses in order to be able to bring in aid. These developments were hard to foresee when Ishaq made *Karama has no Walls* (2012) and *The Mulberry House* (2013).

Between Love and Rejection

Human Rights Film

A newly formulated category of documentary film has emerged in the last ten to fifteen years based on a human rights discourse and a 'politics of justice', which has replaced a 'discourse of pity'; this turn from a focus on pitying an individual or groups of people to seeking collective justice was originally formulated by Hannah Arendt (1990) and has been used subsequently within a development context by Luc Boltanski (1999). According to the 2004-created Charter of Human Rights Film Network, a consortium of Human Rights Film Festivals, the definition of a human rights film is as follows: 'Human Rights Films in our view, are films that reflect, inform on and provide understanding of the actual state of past and present human right violations, or the visions and aspirations concerning ways to redress those violations' (Human Rights Film Network n.d.). Another new kid on the block in the documentary format is the so-called 'transformational' documentary, coined by the Aware Guide founder and CEO, Gary Tomchuk, which focuses on 'solutions' to injustice. This new movement of documentary film-makers is both claiming a clearly defined space against injustice and also aligning itself with social movements. The documentary movement in the 1930s and the early Russian documentary film-makers carved out a space to critique injustice both in content and through documentary shooting or editing techniques (see Grierson and Hardy 1966). Newly emergent, however, is the embeddedness of these films in social movements and the establishment of distribution networks via festivals and of course the Internet.

The discourse of the 'politics of justice', has empowered many minority groups, women's groups, social movements and has also inspired the prominence of the human rights documentary strand. Historically speaking such politics fit well within and continues a documentary

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Between Love and Rejection

film-making tradition that has emphasized the ability to show evidence of injustice. The aim is to raise awareness, becoming a tool for advocacy due to the perceived ability of documentary to reveal 'truth'. Historically formulated truth assumptions have been based on the ability of the camera to produce an indexical link to real-live events (Bazin 2009). The debate about 'truth' in documentary has temporarily concluded that 'truths are subjective, multiple and at times contradictory' (Kochberg 2003: 1) which echoes Linda Williams' formulation of documentary offering a 'continuum of multiple truths' (1993: 10). A very different position, but highly relevant for autobiographical or interactive films such as Ishaq's films is Bruzzi's position on truth as 'that which emerges through the interactions between the film-makers and the subject in front of the camera' (2000: 76). Truth claims may be contested and reformulated in different ways, but the referential claims to the historical are retained and often highlighted; like looking at a scar that must be shown to prove someone has been tortured, the eye of the camera has served as witness and as evidence of injustice, as an important ingredient in the process of attaining justice. The question is if this is enough in the present complex political, social and familial situations.

Ishaq's documentary *Karama has no Walls* fits the category of the human rights film very well, with its images of a violent crackdown during the Friday of Dignity (18 March 2011). This was a peaceful protest against President Saleh leading to 42 people being killed, 300 people injured and hope for a better future dashed. The film focuses on the peaceful protest against corruption and injustice, set within an Islamic discourse. South Yemen had its Socialist party but with the unification of North and South Yemen in the 1990s and the recent Islamization of Yemen, just like in other areas of the Middle East, divergent voices are available but not prominent. However, Ishaq's documentaries generally offer an approach to the conflicts which news production and current affairs programmes from western film-makers cannot, framing events within the existing local cultural and religious context while using a human rights discourse. To frame the

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Between Love and Rejection

Arab Spring as a democratization movement is a form of western bias, assuming that democracy is the best political system. Corruption, freedom from fear of security forces and protest against injustice have been reoccurring themes in the western-biased framed coverage. After all, a democratic voting system for the president and a multi-party government existed in Yemen but was undermined by conflicting tribal power relations. Ishaq is in a position to represent the desires of Yemenis who want justice and participation in their ruling, without using an idealized notion of western democracy as the main point of reference.

Karama has no Walls – which Ishaq made shortly before *The Mulberry House* – does not analyse the wider context and shares the weakness of observational films generally: it lacks analysis and political context (Nichols 2010) which, in my opinion, undermines the efficacy of the film. It is a well-made historical document of The Day of Dignity and offers witness accounts of those events, highlighting the bravery of the different camera people involved and the brutality of the security forces. It was those characteristics which led the film to be nominated for an Oscar for the best foreign documentary, together with the *The Square* (2013) by Jehane Noujaim, a documentary filmed in Egypt's Tahir square during the Arab Spring. Both *The Square* and *Karama has no Walls* are important historical documents and both are framed within a human rights discourse, with an intention to 'tell the world'; as one reviewer commented, these 'films tended to focus on a "firebrand" point of view' (Wilkinson 2014). The subjectivity of the two films is aligned with that of the protestors seeking justice and fair government.

Both film-makers also admit that politically little has changed but that the awareness of the role of women in the protest has been highlighted and as such undermines perceptions of women in the Islamic world (interview, *BBC Newsnight*, 16 January 2014, YouTube). This point of view is supported by Soumaya Ghannoushi, a British Tunisian writer, academic and

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Between Love and Rejection

journalist who reports that dominant myths of Arab women as ‘caged in, silenced, and invisible’ (2011b) were shattered. But they confirm that while social awareness has been raised, political rights have not been altered. Such ‘firebrand’ films are important ‘to tell the world’ but their transformational power is limited due the weakness of the observational films shooting strategy. Just showing tends to be not enough, stories need to be framed to be accessible for audiences.

Chaudhuri (2014) argues that cinema can counteract the ways mainstream news media desensitize audiences to the suffering of those outside the West: the endless stream of images of protests being violently crushed and the many injured and dead are almost interchangeable as states, security forces and the military in many cases have turned against their populations with increasing violence. In line with Chomsky and Herman ([1988] 2002) she suggests that mainstream media manufacture consent for policies and practices that ignore human rights. For instance no newspaper or news broadcaster accessible in the United Kingdom has really questioned, much less challenged the validity of the Saudi coalition bombing of Yemen since summer 2015. Human rights cinema may challenge this consent via cinematic representation of the violent crushing of protests in the Middle East that has become more prevalent during the last fifteen years. The power of documentary apart from raising awareness and providing insight and some documentaries, mainly the transformational ones offer potential for social change but the perceived power of documentary is almost limitless for people who feel they have no other source to turn to. In Ishaq’s film *The Mulberry House*, the director’s father says ‘Documenting events with her camera can help people, and uploading it so the world sees... she’s reflecting people’s pain’ – though her grandfather seems less sure.

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Between Love and Rejection

While *Karama has no Walls* covered the Friday of Dignity protest and the crackdown including the violence and is set in a context of social injustice and a human rights discourse, *The Mulberry House* is a completely different film: still framed within a human rights discourse but with a focus on the film-maker's relationship with her family, mainly her father and grandfather, and the families' response and indeed direct engagement with the demonstrations in Sana'a, the capital of Yemen. As such there is a shift in approach between the two films – the first located in the public sphere of the revolution and the second in the private sphere of the family. This shift in strategy represents a powerful shift in the approach of how issues of rights and politics can be addressed within the interplay of the family unit.

I would argue that *The Mulberry House* is an important historical document highlighting the aspirations of the people in the film. While it does not centre directly on collective action or large public protests, it does form a part of a human rights cinema discourse by fostering closer ties and compassion with the Muslim 'others' on-screen for non-Muslim audiences in the West. Indeed, *The Mulberry House* de-others Muslim 'others' in a way few films have done, and almost no news or current affairs reports can do – creating imagined human connections between those on-screen and those in front of it. Whether one agrees with those on-screen or not, their world becomes part of the emotional and political world of the audience while watching. I would argue that the power of the autobiographical documentary is to bring audiences closer to far away 'others', who belong to different religious and cultural traditions. Cinema as an art form is a powerful and influential ideological apparatus. Expressing the changing perception of 'I' and 'the other' through the characters it creates, documentary can play an important role both in the production of intercultural differences, and the minimization of them.

Between Love and Rejection

The Mulberry House: The power of being there

The Mulberry House is a hybrid between an autobiographical and a participatory documentary. We are entering daily family life in Sana'a, during what is described as the Yemeni Spring. We hear and see family conversations; we witness the family's emotional engagement with the political events, and their actions to free the director's cousin Waleed, who has been arrested without any charges being made against him. We are there in the family house, sharing the intimacy, the fun, the shock, the coming to action and the internal family frictions. We see family life as it is, but in a politically charged and fast moving environment.

Ishaq's hybrid form of personal narration and direct engagement with the pro-filmic events brings us closer to the family. This film achieves what many human rights films aim for but find difficult to achieve, as there are no 'others' in this film from which we can distance ourselves or whom we can judge as completely 'different' from us (Muslim or not). I think *The Mulberry House* is the most powerful communication we have available to us, to see, hear or feel Muslim family life in Yemen or anywhere else in the Middle East at this moment in time. The film offers a strong counter discourse to the popular western one regarding Muslim 'others' as almost alien, with different cultural and religious values, traditionally dressed and living in a world completely different to the West. This film brings us into the middle of a family, to share in the emotional relations, the tensions, the discussions, the warmth and closeness of an extended family with complicated intergenerational relations.

The family is aware of the camera, and regular references are made to the filming process, such as shifting objects around to unblock the camera's view when having lunch or stepping back to give the camera space. These actions demonstrate awareness of the film-making process – an awareness that incorporates the audience into the narrative. The so called fourth wall is broken by these regular comments about the camera and by references to the audience as if they are present. Within documentary theory it is generally assumed that the camera has an

Between Love and Rejection

effect on the pro-filmic situation (except for hardline direct cinema supporters). As such it produces an interesting pro-filmic scene, a mix of the public and private sphere and a kind of *interspatial* location as an effect of the presence of the camera. The presence of the camera in the context of *The Mulberry House* has two important effects: First, although the filming takes place in the private family home, by its mere presence the camera turns this space into a public domain, requiring the women to wear a hijab (except for Sara all the other women wear a hijab or avoid showing their hair by other means, such as hoodies). Second, the most significant aspect of the ‘woman with camera’ in this space seems to be risk. Ishaq produces risk with her questions or wanting to film on ‘the square’, the public domain. The unpredictability of her questions and her actions illustrate the different positions she takes, whether it is challenging her father or grandfather, protesting against the Islamic dress code (Eltahawy 2015; Alibhai-Brown 2014) or wanting to film on ‘the square’, creating a ‘direct cinema’ ambience, adding that flavour of ‘crisis’ and giving the film momentum.

Although in many reviews of *The Mulberry House* (2013) the low technical quality is commented on, the emotional power of this film is not located in the aesthetics or impressive technical features; nor does the film’s impact depend on a perfect narrative, but rather the film’s power and importance lies in ‘being there and feeling you are there’ in that family at a time of deep social and political conflict. At this moment in history, with all the Islamophobia and demonization of that religion, may itself be considered a political act of utter rebellion and necessity, and could indeed change mind and hearts if it could be seen by mass Christian audiences in the West. Sana Wassef (as quoted in Marks 2003: 30) remarks in relation to the Lebanese film-maker Jocelyn Saab that her works ‘contain a gaze from the inside and an understanding often lacking in western journalism and documentaries’ and the same could be argued of Ishaq’s film. It might be considered an easy argument to make but not so long ago this gaze was not available in the West.

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Between Love and Rejection

Film culture in Yemen

Ishaq's films have been broadcast on Al-Jazeera, which rendered territorial rights for the United Kingdom as no longer available, but *The Mulberry House* has not been broadcast by any of the four state broadcasters in Yemen, which are considered to be a mouthpiece of the government (Hillauer 2005). Yemen does not have a developed film culture or film/media education. Cinemas were closed more than 25 years ago, although in the shopping mall in Sana'a there was a small commercial cinema, which now after the start of the civil war has also closed (Ishaq 2015). The first feature film in Yemen was released in 2006, shot in Yemen by Bader Ben Hirsi, a British Yemeni film-maker /playwright. The production of *A New Day in Old Sana'a* (Hirsi, 2006) had been complicated. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism provided \$40,000 for the production, and several script changes were requested for religious or political reasons. Conservative Islamists stormed the location on first day of shooting, making the assumption that the film production was a cover for the CIA or Mossad. This illustrates an engrained suspicion of 'film' or 'media' in Yemen.

Film as a production culture is considered problematic in moral and religious terms (Shafik 1998; Hillauer 2005). Ishaq highlights in an interview in the *Yemen Times* the necessity of giving more freedom to independent film (documentary) makers in a careful but resolute way (Al-Khayad 2014). Apart from Ishaq, one other female film-maker is well known, the Yemeni American documentary and feature film-maker Khadija al-Salama, who last year won the Dubai Film Festival with *I'm Nojoon, age 10 and Divorced* (2014) and has also directed several films on Yemeni culture and the position of women. Overseas film-makers have made films about Yemen, specifically women in Yemen such as Fibi Kraus and Gudrun Torrubia who produced *Haram Yemen: The Hidden Half Speaks* (2006) on request by the Women's National Committee of Sana'a' in order 'to make Yemeni men and politicians aware of the reality of

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Between Love and Rejection

their women' (Boxberger 2006). Changes *can* be identified, driven by a younger generation demanding social and political change and by those educated in western countries. Plenty of 'campaigning work on the ground is going on' (Ishaq 2015). The well-known Yemeni Peace Project, set up by two American Yemenis, consider the development of an artistic and film culture as part of their advocacy work. They have shown shorts and documentary films in Yemen, the United States and the United Kingdom on a wide range of social and political topics. Rawabit Media and Zoom Media (British Council funded) are two recently founded film companies that produce short films published on social media and the Internet. A younger generation, technically savvy and full of ambitions, together with Yemenis in the diaspora who are trying to develop a film culture and cinema that represents their own concerns, hopes, ambitions and sensibilities.

What these film-makers – and many Arab film-makers (Shafik 1998; Marks 2003), including Ishaq and al-Salama – have in common is that their training as film-makers has taken place in the West. Of these three well-known film-makers, Bader Ben Hirs studied Drama Production at Goldsmiths College and works as a film-maker and playwright, Ishaq studied for an MFA in Film Directing at the Edinburgh School of Art and al-Salama earned an M.A. in Communication in the United States. Many film-makers and artists from Arab countries, perhaps even the majority, receive at least some of their professional media training overseas at present. Laura Marks noted back in 2003 (2003: 49) the importance of western education for female Arab film-makers. Although this important fact has been noted, very few have raised the issue of the effects of this development. Might it be that the more Arab film-makers are being educated by western film institutions the more the distinctiveness of their regional voice is diluted? For instance all films by the three mentioned Yemeni film-makers may focus on a Yemeni topic but for instance the narrative structure follows the classic realist narrative (Bordwell and

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Between Love and Rejection

Thompson [1979] 2009) dominant in the West. I think the narrative structure often referred to in the literature on Arab Cinema – ‘the mosaic’ – (Hillauer 2005) could be explored to establish a more culturally specific way of telling stories. Not that film-makers like Ishaq and al-Salama have had a choice of film schools or other education institutions originating closer to home, apart from Egypt and Lebanon. Jordan and EUE have recently set up film schools in collaboration with the USC’s Annenberg School of Communication, so again, far-flung film and media educational influences are more available than regional ones. Naficy (2013) describes related trends in higher education – of universities setting up campuses in the Middle East, and students going to the West to be trained, as a brain drain issue from the Global South. There are very few possibilities for film-makers in the Middle East due to censorship, and religious and cultural traditions, as Ishaq already highlighted in her interview for the *Yemen Times*. Hjort (2013) highlights the creation of international networks in these contexts which could lead to international productions.

Both of Ishaq’s films have been funded and produced in an international context.² Florida (2002) highlighted the emergence of a new professional class, a creative class, which not only operates in film production but produces ‘culture in its widest sense and a potential of new meaning-making’. This class consists of mostly western well-educated people with high cultural capital and an ability to translate their technical and cultural know-how in different social and political circumstances. It constitutes a powerful elite. It might be argued that this is a new form of colonialism but on the other hand but there seems to be very little initiative regionally to develop for instance a local film industry, apart of course from Egypt, which has had a strong film industry since the 1950s. The increased Islamization of the Middle East and its concerns over the cultural influence of film production, as is the case in Yemen, alongside the lack of

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Between Love and Rejection

cinemas, drives young ambitious film-makers either to the West or to the Internet. The latter offers limited possibility to make a living from film production.

Over the last decade we can identify an increase in female documentary film-makers in the Middle East as noted by media and academic research (Women Making Movies, Marks 2003; Hillauer 2005). The film industry with its immoral associations is generally not considered an acceptable place for Arab women, as critic and historian Viola Shafik (1998) points out, but those in the West either in exile or as part of an ex colonial diaspora take their chances. We can conclude that an emerging film culture could be identified, consisting mostly of low budget, amateur films or works in co-production with western countries or other countries in the Middle East. Unfortunately progress has stagnated – in Yemen at least – due to the civil war. Ishaq had the feature film *The Bicycle* in development, which was set to be researched and shot in Yemen but this project had be halted due to the conflict.

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Transcultural hybrid identities, the third space and accented cinema

Kassem Mahmoud (1995) researched how filmic autobiographies have proliferated in Arab cinema since 1979 and how they have turned into a significant subgenre of Arab cinema. They exhibit common features, such as the interlacement of the private with the public as one pertinent whole; thus in the histories of most directors, as with Ishaq, we often find intimately woven political dramas depicting the problems that have beset the Arab world from the 1940s up until more recent political events. This echoes Renov's suggestion that the 'autobiographical "embraces and is inflected by the political"' (2008: 47). The era during which autobiographical film was considered a private indulgence has passed; however, using 'I' as a film-maker sets up a very different narrative and makes the film-maker far more vulnerable. When you stick your head out as a film-maker, it requires bravery and an urgency to tell the story while also acknowledging that your subjective position of the 'I' singular refers back to the 'I' plural

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Between Love and Rejection

(Lebow 2008). Lebow conceptualizes this by referring to Nancy (2000). 'I' not as a unique individual but that 'I' always implies and indeed embodies 'another'. The 'I' in this context is always a social construction and conceived in relation to 'others'. We may believe that 'I' expresses our individual subjectivity, but as 'I' is a social construction, it always embodies and incorporates our interconnectedness or commonality with a particular culture or society. This approach undermines and challenges notions of individuality as produced by western neo-liberal capitalist society which liberates the autobiographical film from its individual, private and personal connotations, allowing it to be perceived at the same time as a social and political document. This approach concurs with Mahmoud's (1995) analysis of autobiographical films in the Middle East. Ishaq's basic challenge in the film is the patriarchal power of her father. Her challenge has influenced her sister's ambitions, who clearly wants to study abroad and even comments, 'for what I want to do in my life, I don't need to be married'. The implicit understanding of sharing the same social position is obvious in the film, but Ishaq's more radical rejection of the 'suffocating' limitation of women opens and frames the film via her narration. While western autobiographical film-makers might present themselves as autonomous subjects, the perception of the social embeddedness of the self in different cultures, specifically Arab culture in this case, undermines any notion of a personal and unique film narrative. Even more, the awareness of subjectivity as part of sociality as presented by many transcultural film-makers such as Ishaq makes the perception of autonomy practically impossible. Those film-makers from the developing world, often postcolonial countries, who live permanently away from their home country or move between different countries, tend to be fully aware of the historical and social construction of their 'subjectivity'. Ishaq as a Scottish Yemeni film-maker is situated in what is described as the 'third space' by Homi Bhabha ([1994]2004). Born in Scotland, she lived between the ages of 2 and 17 in Yemen, followed

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Between Love and Rejection

by study in Scotland and she lives now in Cairo. Her family lives in Yemen and Scotland but also in the Netherlands. Homi Bhabha ([1994] 2004) introduced the concept of hybrid identity and the third space, with both concepts occupying a central place in postcolonial discourse. Hybrid identities are 'celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-betweenness, the straddling of two cultures and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference' (Hoogvelt 1997: 158). Bhabha suggests that a new hybrid identity or subject-position emerges, described as located in the third space from the interweaving of elements of the colonizer and colonized. Hybridity is considered as a form of liminal or in-between space, where the 'cutting edge of translation and negotiation' between cultures occurs (Bhabha 1996). Thus, the third space is a mode of articulation, a way of describing a productive, and not merely reflective, space that engenders new possibilities. It is an 'interruptive, interrogative, and enunciative' (Bhabha 1994) space of new forms of cultural meaning and production, blurring the limitations of existing boundaries and calling into question established categorizations of culture and identity.

Basically the third space is proposed as a concept for analysing the enunciation, transgression and subversion of dualistic categories going beyond binary oppositional positions. The hybrid's potential is with their particular knowledge of 'transculturation' (Taylor 1991), their ability to transverse both cultures and to translate, negotiate and mediate affinity and difference within a dynamic of exchange and inclusion. As Ishaq demonstrates, they have encoded within them a counter-hegemonic agency. The concept of the third space within a cultural and identity theorization echoes what Naficy describes as an 'interstitial location' (2001: 291), the location of cinema produced by film-makers in exile and diaspora who tend to originate from the developing world which he launches as 'accented' cinema. Accented, being a linguistic term, is here translated to cinema, as these films do have a non-western 'accent'. Naficy's concept of

Between Love and Rejection

the ‘accented cinema’ is ‘located at the intersection of aesthetic systems, languages, nations, practices and cultures’; a kind of ‘third space’ films, so to speak.

Naficy’s impressive research provides a new conceptualization of a generation of transcultural film-makers and their films. In a globalized and a postcolonial context these film-makers have become part of a body of cinematic representations infused by transnational consciousness and mobility and an aptitude for transculturation which is expressed in their films and also provides a critical tool for analysing these films. Ishaq plays out her hybridity and third space location literally in the film, and her position as film-maker behind the camera actually provides the filmic structure as she controls the gaze of the audience, as I will demonstrate below.

Behind the camera: Agent provocateur

Sara Ishaq is a self-shooting film-maker (de Jong 2014). When she is behind the camera, she challenges and provokes – mainly her father but also other family members. Her approach in these scenes highlights Jean Rouch’s conceptualization of ‘Cinema Verite’ (2003). Rouch considered the film camera as a tool to provoke people into showing their true colours. At the same time that the Direct Cinema movement in the United States tried to reduce the film camera to a fly on the wall, Jean Rouch acknowledged it as an elephant in the room, a machine that cannot be ignored, and in fact an agent provocateur. But standing behind the camera Ishaq describes it as a ‘safe space’ (2014). The camera protects her she feels, but at the same time the camera itself has a provocative effect on the pro-filmic scene.

One of the key scenes of *The Mulberry House* shows a discussion with her father while she is behind the camera. She uses the camera to provoke a reaction about an incident that happened when she was 16 years old and was almost married off to an older man. The camera is used as a tool in Rouch’s sense as a tool of provocation to get to the truth of this incident. The camera is almost a gun pointed at the father. He does address the subject with her, but denies her point

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Between Love and Rejection

of view and blames it on a misunderstanding, while the image shows a baffled man. He argues that he was under the impression that she had agreed to marry and therefore he as the father agreed to the marriage. She states that she had not agreed at all. She does not accept his interpretation of this event. Ishaq states that the father suggested 'it was good to marry young because the husband could shape the personality of the woman'. His disappointment at her not being married at 27 years old is shown again in a sequence in which he jokingly puts a marriage ad in the *Yemeni Times*. He jokingly says: 'One of the revolution's achievements will be that Sara finds a husband'. She rebels with all arguments and emotions possible and at the same time is drawn to him by his warmth, humour and expressions of love and admiration. Love can be as nourishing and as paralysing as we can see from this conflict between cultures and individual wishes. The father has actually studied and lived in Scotland and was married to a Scottish woman but it is clear that for him hybrid identity does not necessarily mean actually entering and accepting the third space. We get full blown rejection of the 'western point of view' by her father while from Sara Ishaq's point of view Yemeni cultural traditions in relation to women in this context are also completely rejected. There is no real trace here of a negotiation or transculturalization: the difference is binary and oppositional.

Moving in front of the camera: Finding emotional connectedness

Ishaq also moves out of her 'safe space' into the pro-filmic scene and situates herself within her family but specifically in relation to her father. In one scene the family is watching TV and Ishaq sits next to her father on the sofa and drops her head on his shoulder to which he responds by bending his head so the two heads touch. The scene focuses on the emotional closeness between herself and her father. Her father's love, his pride in what she has achieved and in the film she is making is regularly articulated by him and often 'drips' from the screen. The deep

Between Love and Rejection

emotional bond between them and her challenge of his 'patriarchal' authority drives the film and seems actually to be the main theme of the film.

Transculturation: Being a media professional

From an agent provocateur behind the camera, to being socially and emotionally embedded in a family, she moves the camera's gaze to her as a media professional. As a former media researcher in the Middle East with contacts with UK broadcasters she reports for the BBC about the demonstrations and the demands of the citizens. She highlights her Yemeni background by emphasizing that the demonstrations are peaceful but stipulates that her full name cannot be used in the report, presumably to protect her position and that of her family in Yemen. With ease and professional awareness, she delivers a concise and informative report on the political situation.

Bhabha's third space and Hamid Naficy's interstitial space are illustrated well in Ishaq's *The Mulberry House*. The oscillations between the positions via the different gazes and camera positions illustrate the complexity of the third space well. The celebrations of that space – as a new hybrid identity, a place from which to form new cultural interpretations and to subvert cultural notions – are innovative and transgressive but the tensions and conflicts between the different positions within this third space seem to be imbued by insolvable gender expectations. Identities are always complex social constructions between class, race and culture, but gender expectations seem to be fundamentally conflicted.

Both Homi Bhabha and Namid Naficy use gender as a critical category, and it is indeed usual for the default position to be male, while women alone signify 'gender'. Somehow the notion that men are gendered too seems to fail to enter many academic minds, concepts and discourses. Moodley (2003) in her analysis of films by Indian film-makers Mira Nair and Mehta discusses

Between Love and Rejection

how the representation of women claiming agency can contribute to a specific position of female transnational film-makers and a potential postcolonial feminist film practice. As for Ishaq, she does not profile herself as a feminist, like many female documentary film-makers who refuse to 'label' themselves. These female documentary film-makers claim their agency, and are moving into unknown territories and are aware of a history in which 'gender' is always restricting; so they move in directions that use a human rights discourse, above all claiming agency through their desire to move beyond categories and go boldly where none has gone before.³

Floating hybrid identities in the third space

Ishaq comes from an educated, well-off family. Her father studied abroad and some of her brothers have also studied abroad and are living abroad. The diasporic family generally tends to be international in its orientation and in this case fully engages with the request for political change in Yemen, but challenges to a patriarchal authority are a very different matter.

It is important to conceptualize this third space without strict culture boundaries as both national cultures are in a constant process of evolving. Yemeni women claim their space in the demonstrations, as Ishaq shows in her film, as well as on some of her YouTube shorts. Wearing a hijab does not mean you cannot be heard or have a voice. However, her film demonstrates her ability for transculturation and at the same time, the subversion of cultural norms, the fluidity between different positions as empowering, culturally rich but at the same time an uncertain 'floating' position. Belonging is actually culturally and socially located. In her film we witness as she slowly merges with and embeds herself in Yemeni culture through her family ties. Ishaq when asked about her sense of belonging answers 'I'm universal' straight away followed by 'I'm Arab', followed by silence and 'I have discovered I'm more Yemeni than I thought' (2015). Her Scottish background as part of western culture is criticized as 'being too

Between Love and Rejection

focused on work' (Ishaq 2014). She currently lives in a different location in the Middle East: Cairo. She concludes that being transcultural 'is a curse and a blessing' (Ishaq 2015). The floating nature of the third space provides not only inspiration and unique translational abilities but also a complex sense of belonging. It could be argued the third space for all its merits is also a trap, as it only provides a transient and floating sense of self. If culture is the air we breathe, breathing different air will never give you 'the fish in the water feeling' of belonging again.

Conclusion

Here I have mainly discussed films by Sara Ishaq, especially *The Mulberry House*, in the context of human rights films, as the film – though focusing closely in on family and mostly filmed in a domestic context – aligns itself with protestors against the oppressive government.

The autobiographical film shot in a participatory style breaks down the fourth wall in film-making and reins in, so to speak, the audience in the pro-filmic scene. As a result the film achieves what many human rights films or news coverage cannot achieve: de-othering of others. So it could be argued it is not the human rights discourse of the film that facilitates this effect but the autobiographical and participatory shooting strategy of the film.

Transcultural film-makers are an increasing phenomenon and, as both Homni Bhabha and Naficy argue, their hybrid identities and cultural location in what is described as the third space offers a new cultural space characterized by transgression, subversion and transcultural translation. The latter is highly valued in media production as the transcultural film-maker or journalist offers a gaze that can contextualize events within local and global contexts. These forms of transculturalization challenge hegemonic approaches.

Identity tends to be conceptualized as rooted in a certain location. It is obvious that the third space is a floating location with leads to floating identities. The celebrations of this space of

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Between Love and Rejection

new forms of cultural production and creativity might be at the personal level if the transcultural film-maker challenge his or her culture of origin. However, the third space has been 'gendered' by several academics but not further explored. In the case of gender the binary opposition might be a more realistic analysis than hybridity.

It would seem there are some limits to hybridity for 'accented' female film-makers. Theorists like Bhabha and Naficy have considered gender as well as 'third spaces' and 'interstitial spaces' respectively; however, perhaps they cannot truly consider the alienated space of a film-maker like Ishaq – a loved member of a family, who was also once considered to have so little agency that she could be 'married off' without her consent; a person who even at home is included in a category of people (women) with far less agency than their male counterparts.

The actually quite simplistic epistemology of the human rights film is complicated by domestic situations where the full complexity of the negotiation of politics and affect has to take place – a place within which hybridity itself comes under reflexive scrutiny.

It is a 'blessing' that Ishaq's relationship with her father illuminates a kind of healing pathway for her alienated position; it shows that she can make arguments for her personal freedom openly and her father will take her critique on-board and even validate her importance as a political being/person – as we see when he defends the potential importance of her filmmaking. This strong and warm father love might serve as a ray of light at the end of the tunnel for younger women in the Arab world who desire equality and social agency for themselves – or indeed for women anywhere. Meanwhile transcultural film-makers like Ishaq oscillate between love and rejection which complicates the notion of the human rights film.

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Wilma de Jong is a Senior Lecturer in Media Theory and Practice at the University of Sussex and co-convenes the MA Media Practice for Development and Social Change.

Wilma studied Anthropology and Media and owned an independent film company for thirteen years. Author of several articles/books on documentary production and teaching documentary, she is also co-author of *Creative Documentary, Theory and Practice* (2011) and *Rethinking Documentary: New Perspectives and New Practices* (2009). She continues to make short films and currently has a documentary in production on DIY practices in Development Aid among civil society groups.

Between Love and Rejection

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Notes

Between Love and Rejection

¹ Short biography (Sara Ishaq): Sara Ishaq was born in Scotland and moved to Sana'a, capital of Yemen when she was 2 years old.

She moved to the home country of her mother, Scotland, to pursue further education in Edinburgh when she was 17 years old. She studied Politics and Humanities, worked as a television researcher in the Middle East and completed a M.A. in Film Directing at the Edinburgh College of Art. Her first documentary *Karama Has No Walls*, about the Friday of Dignity massacre in Sana'a in 2011 premiered at Prague's One World International Human Rights Film Festival in 2012, and was nominated for the New Talent BAFTA (2014) and an Oscar for the Best Short Documentary (2014).

In 2011, she returned to Yemen to make a film about her grandfather but ended up filming her family during the Yemen uprising while reporting for the BBC. This film *The Mulberry House* (2013) is the focus of this article.

Her latest short film '*Out of the Rubble*' (Yemen, 2015) on an art project, Sara was involved in Sana'a can be found on Youtube (<https://vimeo.com/149478692>).

² Production information *The Mulberry House*: producer: Diana El Jeiroudi, ProAction Film, Syria, recently moved to Berlin, Mostafa Youssef, Seen Films; co-producer: Sara Ishaq, Setara Films, Enjaaz, A Dubai Film Market Initiative Country: Yemen, Egypt, Syria, United Kingdom, UAE; supported by: Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC) – Crossroads programme, IDFA Bertha Fund, Ford Foundation Just Films!, artistic mobility support by Al Mawred Al Thaqafy (Culture Resource), mobility support by Safarfund – Istikshaf.

Between Love and Rejection

³ IDFA 2014 organized a session on the 'Female Gaze' and invited many well-known female documentary film-makers to participate. Most of them refused to be labelled or put in a corner. Kim Longinotto, a British documentary film-maker whose films predominantly address the lives of women all over the world, was among those who refused to be labelled.